



LINCOLN LORE

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Published by

The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company
Fort Wayne, Indiana

ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S SCHOOL DAYS

Abraham Lincoln's formal education has been given very little consideration by those interested in studying his life; and, when his achievements are discussed, his school days are seldom mentioned as contributing factors in his training. Lincoln himself is partly responsible for the glossing over of the short but very important periods during which he received instruction from Kentucky and Hoosier school-masters. As a nominee for the presidency he had occasion to write about his early days, and, observing the many advantages enjoyed by the school children of 1860 over those of 1820, he drew a very gloomy word picture of the pioneer schools on the western frontier. Somehow biographers concluded from this and other statements that Lincoln was denied even the meager educational opportunities then available.

It can now be shown that Lincoln's formal instruction was not inferior to that of the majority of other boys who grew up in the wilderness. He went as far in his reading, writing, and arithmetic as the pioneer school was able to carry him. The school-houses occupied, the school terms attended, the school-teachers who instructed, and the school-books read are subjects of interest in considering Abraham Lincoln's school days.

School Houses

Abraham Lincoln attended four different log cabin schools; one less than a mile from his home, two different ones about one and one-half miles away, and one nearly four miles distant. A photograph of the first log building where Lincoln went to school with his sister, Sarah, is still extant. The log school-house which served as a gathering place and shelter allowed Abraham Lincoln to enjoy the valuable social contacts made with both teacher and pupil, and in this respect at least his education was not deficient. In one of these rough buildings a course in manners or pioneer etiquette was taught.

School Terms

On one occasion Lincoln wrote that "the aggregate of all his schooling did not amount to one year." yet he attended at least five different terms of school. This would allow approximately two months for each term, which was not an unusually short period for a pioneer school. The court established a ruling that a child bound out to a guardian should have "one year's schooling in the English language."

Lincoln attended two terms of school in Kentucky during 1815 and 1816 when he was six and seven years old respectively, and three terms in Indiana during the years 1820, 1823, 1826 at the ages of 11, 14, and 17 respectively. During the latter period, from 1820 to 1826, there were two boys and three girls in the Lincoln home, and it is likely that the indirect influence of the school continued to play an important part in Lincoln's life for many years.

School Teachers

We are not left in doubt as to who had the honor of instructing Abraham Lincoln, as he remembered the names of those who assisted him in his formal education. His Kentucky teachers were Zachariah Riney and Caleb Hazel; the Indiana instructors were Andrew Crawford, (James) Swaney, and Azel W. Dorsey. No one of them was an itinerant pedagogue, but each one resided in the community where he taught.

While they were not versed in the higher branches, they were all sufficiently educated to instruct Abraham Lincoln during those periods in which he was under their tutorage. Riley was educated in St. Mary County, Maryland, and Hazel in Virginia. Both were good scribes, and the latter, who lived on the farm adjoining the Lincoln's in Kentucky, "had many fine leather bound books."

Crawford, aside from following the teaching profession, was a justice of the peace in Indiana, but little is known about Swaney except that he was a young man and a resident of the county in which he taught. Dorsey, aside from acting as treasurer of Spencer County, also served in other official capacities. At one time he was proprietor of a store. He lived to see his distinguished pupil achieve fame. It would appear from evidence available about these men that they were pioneer teachers of more than average intelligence.

School Books

Dilworth's New Guide to the English Tongue was Lincoln's first school-book. While it was a speller, it also contained "a short but comprehensive grammar" and "a useful collection of sentences in prose and verse."

Although the Bible was probably used in the pioneer schools as a reading book, Lincoln told Herndon that

Murray's English Reader was "the best school-book ever put in the hands of an American youth." It outlines in great detail: Proper Loudness of Voice, Distinctness, Slowness, Pronunciation, Emphasis, Tones, Pauses, and Mode of Reading Verse. The author claimed the selections in his book to be extracted from "the works of the most correct and elegant writers."

Pike's Arithmetic is the text Herndon claimed Lincoln used in Dorsey's school and which enabled him to "cipher through the rule of three." The rule of three is the method of finding a fourth term of a proportion when three are given. This was the most advanced course offered in mathematics. Many pages of Lincoln's own arithmetic copy book have been preserved which prove his efficiency as a mathematician.

Aesop's Fables, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Weems's Washington, Barclay's Dictionary, The Kentucky Preceptor, Weems's Marion, Ramsey's Washington, The Columbia Class Book, Scott's Lessons, and a history of the United States are some of the other books which were read and studied by Lincoln during his school days.

Abraham Lincoln's early training was made more valuable by a sympathetic home atmosphere. Both his own mother and his step-mother encouraged him, and one of the Lincoln's neighbors in Indiana claims that Abraham's father seemed to be proud of his son's ability to learn. A schoolmate of Abraham has left this reminiscence of Lincoln's school days: "Abe was always at school early and attended to his studies, always at the head of his class and passed us rapidly."

The achievements of Lincoln would have been impossible without the primary formal education which he received in log cabin schools.